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ABSTRACT

This paper explores perceptions of teacher education students regarding the relative value of four methods-course components--experiences with children, methods, content, and theory. The objective is to provide information to educators in teacher training programs as they determine how various components of the teacher education process influence preservice teacher growth and development. Data are based on a survey of 138 teacher education majors enrolled in an elementary social studies methods course. Respondents were divided into four groups, according to how much time they spent interacting with elementary school children during the methods course. Group I spent 30% of scheduled class time with individual and small groups of elementary age children; groups II and III spent 5% of class time working with large groups of children during a fall and spring semester, respectively; and group IV spent 2.5% of class time with individual elementary school children. Statistical analysis of responses indicated that groups II, III, and IV identified experience with children (individuals and/or groups) as the most valuable component of their methods course. Group I, however, ranked field experience with children as the least important component. The methods component of the course was ranked second by Groups II, III, and IV, and first by group I; the content component was ranked second by group I, third by groups II and III, and fourth by group IV; and theory was rated third by groups I and IV and fourth by groups II and III. The conclusions are that the amount of time spent working with children affects student perception of the importance of working with children, and specifically, that too much time spent in field work with children can diminish the perceived value of the experience to a preservice teacher. Additional research is suggested on structuring an appropriate balance among experiences with children, methods, content, and theory in a methods course. (DE)

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DIFFERENTIATED NEEDS OF TEACHER TRAINEES: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

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DIFFERENTIATED NEEDS OF TEACHER TRAINEES:

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

PROBLEM

Field experiences prior to student teaching have become quite common in teacher education programs over the past fifteen years. Standards developed for professional teacher education programs by state and national agencies require field experiences to aid in the application and integration of concepts believed necessary for teachers. Concerns expressed by practicing professionals in public school classrooms and teacher education programs have encouraged the incorporation of earlier field experiences in the preservice teacher education curriculum. These statements of concern have pointed especially to the need for more direct application of teaching skills to real public school students.

Peck and Tucker (1973) stated that one theme emerging from research available at the time of their review was "direct involvement in the role to be learned, or close approximations ... produce the desired teaching behavior more effectively than remote or abstract experiences ..." (p. 943). Follow-up studies of teacher education graduates (Schwanke, 1980) also indicated their high value of field experiences in preservice teacher education programs.

Field experiences are commonly included in the methods courses of the teacher education curriculum. Staton-Spicer, Colson and Bassett (1979) and others have stated that experiences

with children can promote and improve social studies education. Methods courses include varying percentages of the four components: content of the subject area, field experiences, methods of teaching and theories of teaching/learning. Relative amounts of time devoted to each of the course components varies widely. There appears to be consensus in the profession that the field experiences are necessary, significant program components (Lindsey, 1961; Smith, 1969; Howsam, 1976).

Questions arise regarding the quantity and quality of these experiences. What is an appropriate balance among experiences with children, methods, content, and theory in a methods course? What types of field experiences are most valuable? Lasley (1980) reports that findings by Newman in a survey of experienced teachers indicates the perceived value of directed teaching to be greater than that of only observations in field experiences.

Another trend observed over the past ten years indicates an increasing number of more mature students, especially females, entering or re-entering the classrooms of colleges and universities. A number of these students have declared teacher education as their major. These individuals may bring rich experiential backgrounds including child-related experiences, into their professional teacher education programs. A question arises regarding the need for all students to participate in the same or similar field experiences.

Before adequately answering the questions of appropriate balance and relative value among the four methods course components (experiences with children, methods, content and theory),

teacher education students' perceptions of the relative value of those components is essential. This study reports data and implications in response to the following research questions:

1. Does the time allocated to experiences with children affect preservice teacher education majors' perceived values of the four course components?

2. Does the age, class standing, or prior child-related experience of the teacher education major affect the perceived values of the four course components in an elementary social studies methods course?

3. Do preservice teacher education majors' perceptions of the value of the four course components change after the student teaching experience? If so, how?

PROCEDURES

Teacher education majors (N=138) enrolled in an elementary social studies methods course responded to a questionnaire. The questionnaire requested respondents to indicate class standing, age and amount of previous formal and informal experience with children. Students included undergraduates (N=69), certified graduate students seeking additional certification at the elementary level (N=30), and graduate students seeking initial elementary teaching certification (N=15). Respondents then indicated the relative importance of each course component (experiences with children, methods, content, and theory) by completing a five point Likert-type scale.

Four groups of students completed the questionnaire. Group I was enrolled in the course during the summer of 1979. Approximately 30% of their scheduled class time was spent planning and working with individual and small groups of elementary age children

Groups II and III participated in the course during the Fall, 1979 and Spring, 1980 semesters, respectively. Students in Groups II and III spent 5% of their time working with large groups of children. Group IV was enrolled in the methods course in the summer of 1980; 2 1/2% of their time was allotted for experiences with individual children.

The questionnaire was readministered to students as they completed student teaching. Student teachers surveyed were from Group I and Group II. Means scores for each of the four course components were obtained from the five point Likert-type scale. Mean scores for each component were then compared in a one way analysis of variance within each group and between groups. Additional comparisons of mean scores utilized t-test procedures. Class standing, age, and formal and informal experiences were identified as variables.

RESULTS

Question 1: Does the time allocated to experiences with children affect preservice teacher education majors' perceived values of the four course components?

A one way analysis of variance for each course component was computed among all groups. Significant differences were found in the comparisions of scores for two course components: Experiences with Children and Methods (see Table 1). Significant differences did not exist for course Content or Theory.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance for
Elementary Social Studies Methods Course Components

Social Studies Course Components	N	$\bar{X}$	F	df	Significance of F
Experiences with Children	138	4.28	18.43	5	.001**
Methods	138	4.70	2.63	5	.026*
Content	138	4.34	1.57	5	.174
Theory	138	3.8	1.88	5	.103

*$p < .05$ **$p \leq .001$

T-test comparisons of group by group responses to the variables Experiences with Children and Methods were conducted. Groups I and IV differed significantly from each of the other groups as evidenced by the p values ($p \leq .001$, $p < .05$) reported for Experiences with Children (see Table 2). T-test comparisons of responses related to the importance of course methods reflected no significant differences, however. Differences did exist with the total group comparision, but did not exist in the group-by-group analysis.

Table 2

Group by Group Comparisions for
Experiences with Children and Methods

Group Comparisons	Experiences with Children			Methods		
	t	df	p	t	df	p
Group I:II	-6.73	60	.001*	1.28	60	.20
Group I:III	-6.59	53	.001*	.16	53	.87
Group I:IV	-5.38	67	.001*	1.53	67	.13
Group II:III	-1.44	43	.16	-.94	43	.35
Group II:IV	2.14	57	.04 *	-.03	57	.97
Group III:IV	2.96	50	.005*	1.16	50	.25

*p <.05; **p <.01

The Group I mean score for Experiences with Children ($\bar{X}$=3.19) was considerably lower than the mean scores of Group II ($\bar{X}$=4.85) and Group III ($\bar{X}$=5.0). The Group IV mean score for Experiences with Children ($\bar{X}$=4.48) also differed significantly from the mean scores of the other groups. The groups registered for an elementary social studies methods course during the summer differed significantly from each other and from the groups registered during the regular school year.

Comparison of mean scores for each group and each course component revealed that, with the exception of Group I, all the groups ranked the order of the components similarly (see Table 3). Experience with Children was identified as the most valuable component. Group I, however, ranked Experiences with Children as least important. The Methods component was ranked second for Groups II, III and IV, and first for Group I.

Table 3

Course Component Mean Scores
for Groups I-IV

Group	Working with Children	Methods	Content	Theory
Group I (30%)	3.19	4.86	4.5	3.56
Group II (5.0%)	4.85	4.69	4.46	4.0
Group III (5.0%)	5.0	4.84	4.32	4.26
Group IV (2.5%)	4.48	4.20	4.03	3.88

Group I spent about 30 percent of total course time working with children. Students in Group I did not react as positively to the Experiences with Children as they did to other course components, nor did they react as positively to Experiences with Children as did Groups II-IV.

Question 2: Does the age, class standing, or prior child-related experience of the teacher education major affect the perceived values of the four course components in an elementary social studies methods course?

Class standing, age, and prior experience were examined as possible factors affecting student perceptions of social studies methods courses. Analysis of variance within each subgroup was conducted for each group for each course component. Significant differences were discovered in several of the sub-group comparisons. Identified between group differences were inconsistent, however. The results are listed in Tables 4 through 7.

Table 4

Group I Significance Level Analysis for Four Methods Course Components

Component	Class Standing	Age	Formal Experience	Informal Experience
Experiences with Children	.11	.07	.02**	.09
Methods	.55	.97	.18	.96
Course Content	.22	.01*	.25	.04**
Theory	.84	.68	.95	.18

*p < .05; **p ≤ .01

Table 5

Group II Significance Level Analysis for Four Methods Course Components

Component	Class Standing	Age	Formal Experience	Informal Experience
Experiences with Children	.66	.27	.74	.03*
Methods	.12	.83	.62	.59
Course Content	.08	.99	.36	.81
Theory	52	.16	.24	.52

*p < .05

Table 6

Group III Significance Level Analysis for Four Methods Course Components

Component	Class Standing	Age	Formal Experience	Informal Experience
Experiences with Children*				
Methods	.36	.39	.40	.55
Course Content	.36	.83	.70	.17
Theory	.97	.36	.70	.11

*All respondents recorded the maximum value of 5.

Table 7

Group IV Significance Level Analysis for Four Methods Course Components

Component	Class Standing	Age	Formal Experience	Informal Experience
Experiences with Children	.03*	.50	.94	.46
Methods	.66	.04*	.24	.05*
Course Content	.34	.20	.83	.07
Theory	.55	.89	.20	.44

*$p \leq .05$

Younger students and students with fewer prior experiences working with children tend to view the acquisition of child related experiences in the methods course more positively. They do, however, tend to consider discussions of appropriate methods as being less valuable than do their older and more experienced counterparts. This suggests that older students and students who have had Experiences with Children want to develop a wider repertoire of methods that they can utilize in social studies instruction for children.

Students registering for the social studies methods courses during summer sessions (groups I and IV) once again appeared to have different expectations than students registering during regular school sessions.

Question 3: Do preservice teacher education majors' perceptions of the value of the four course components change after the student teaching experience? If so, how?

The questionnaire was readministered to respondents late in the student teaching experience. Student teachers were asked to indicate how helpful each of the course components was in facilitating a smooth transition into student teaching. Student teachers comprised a subset of Groups I and II. While no significant differences were found, Group I's mean score for Experiences with Children increased from 3.53 to 4.79 (See Tables 8 and 9). The follow-up responses of Group II indicated that Experiences with Children during the methods course portion of their training was also considered to be beneficial. Student teachers viewed their experiences with children as very beneficial regardless of their previous attitudes.

Table 8

A Comparison of Group I Scores with Post Student Teaching Scores Regarding the Value of Experiences with Children and The Value of Methods

Component	Group I		Post Student Teaching				
	N	X	N	X	t	df	p
Experiences with Children	19	3.53	13	4.23	-1.63	30	.11
Methods	19	4.79	13	4.46	1.55	30	.13

Table 9

A Comparison of Group II Scores with Post Student Teaching Scores Regarding the Value of Experiences with Children and The Value of Methods

Component	Group II		Post Student Teaching				
	N	X	N	X	t	df	p
Experiences with Children	26	4.85	15	4.87	-.15	39	.88
Methods	26	4.69	15	4.47	.94	39	.35

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The amount of time spent working with children appears to affect student perception of the importance of working with children. For example, pre-service educators in the social studies methods course ranked the component, Experiences with Children, lowest and not as beneficial as Method and Theory when they were required to spend thirty percent of allotted course time working with children. However, when two and one-half percent of allotted course time was spent working with children, pre-service educators ranked Experiences with Children highest, but the mean score was below the mean scores of Groups II and III (five percent). This suggests that two and one-half percent of allotted course time working with children was too little. Students who worked with children for five percent of the time ranked their experiences with the children as the most beneficial course component. Furthermore, the attitudes of the two five-percent groups were consistent with one another.

Age, class standing, and prior formal/informal experiences with children appear to be factors that affect preservice teacher attitudes toward social studies methods course components. However, the specific relationships between these factors and attitudes toward the course components is not consistent.

Experiences with Children was rated the highest of the four course components by student teachers. Student teachers indicated that their experiences with children in the methods course portion of their preservice training was an important factor in helping

them adapt to student teaching. Students in Group I, who had initially rated their experiences with children relatively low, indicated a much more positive attitude towards the importance of those experiences. Student teachers from Group I considered experiences with children to have been a very important factor affecting their transition into student teaching.

Significant differences in the perceived values of course components may reflect the differing instructional contexts in which the methods courses were offered. Experiences with children were structured with varying specificity of objectives, use of time, and integration with methods, theory, and content components. Social studies methods courses offered in summer sessions provided experiences with children in a non-traditional setting. This is a factor requiring additional consideration.

As professional educators espouse the need for individualization in planning, implementing and evaluating instruction for the public school classroom, so too must teacher educators assess the entry proficiencies and determine how professional program components can better facilitate preservice teacher growth and development. This study investigated limited aspects of student profiles. Continued research can help clarify the strength of the factors presented in this study. Additionally, other factors affecting individual needs of teacher education majors can help to expand this profile.

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